Ogbanje (or ‘Children who come and go’)

For a time, the babies died so fast

they were called by one name: ogbanje.

The reaper thrust his double sickles

into their infant blood and shore

the breath from each tiny chest.

Mothers blessed with the cure –

just one diseased allele, a savior

from malaria – were made to bury

baby after baby, search for iyi-uwa:

the thing which binds the spirit

of a dead child to the world, to haunt

his mother survivor, forever,

and take the poisoned child’s corpse,

the rag doll, bit of small toy, and burn it.

Sickle cell anaemia is an autosomal recessive genetic disorder. Carriers, who have one copy of the normal HBB gene (Hb A) and one copy of Hb S, are described as having sickle cell trait and do not express disease symptoms, but a person that receives the defective gene from both father and mother develops the disease. The HBB gene is found in region 15.5 on the short (p) arm of human chromosome 11 (11p15.5).